Tiredness in the Light of Institutional Ethnography

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Karin Widerberg

Tiredness in the Light of Institutional Ethnography

Dorothy E. Smith is known for her thorough critique of the sociological traditions, for our way of "writing the social" from a ruler's perspective[1]. And for the alternative she outlines; a sociology that starts out from where women are, that is, in the local actualities of everyday life. Now, in "Institutional Ethnography" (Smith 2006), she once more brings forth ideas and issues she has been working with all along but wants to develop further. In institutional ethnography it all seems to come together; texts and relations organising the social across time and space.

The term institutional ethnography was used by Dorothy E. Smith already in her early work[2] but lately she and her followers have started to use it also as a kind of research program for sociology[3]. Thus, a sociology is proposed that explores the institutional order from the point of view of people who are in various ways implicated and participating in it. It does not aim to understand the institution, organization, etc. as such, like in system theory. It only takes the social activities of the institution as a starting-point. The purpose is to illuminate the connections between the local and extra-local, thereby, making the workings of society visible.

Together with Ulla-Britt Lilleaas I conducted a large scale research project (1998–2000) with the title "The sociality of tiredness – the handling of tiredness in a gender, generation and class perspective". It grew out of our various and previous research projects but also, and not surprisingly, out of our own experiences.

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[1] Expressed in most of her works, in depth in particular in her books; D.E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic. A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1987), Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power - A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), Smith, *Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling* (London: Routledge 1990), Smith, *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory and Investigations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1999), Smith, *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People* (AltaMira Press 2005)

[2] Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic. A Feminist Sociology.*

[3] In her article "Texts and the Ontology of Organizations and Institutions", *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies* (2001) vol. 7, 159-1982001, Smith develops the perspective of institutional ethnography as well as gives empirical illustrations of its use. It is the very topic of her latest book, Smith, *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People* (AltaMira Press 2005).

On a more personal level, in our own lives, the previous soft moaning of our bodies was now more like a roaring thunder. Our stiffed bodies ached, making us aware of every movement. And the tiredness we felt was like a fog, which we struggled to get through. Knowing, as sociologists, that this was not a unique state but probably a rather typical one of our generation academic women who have wanted it all – home, kids and career – we decided to investigate it. How tired was it "normal" to be? Was everybody equally tired – men, women of different generations, classes and ethnic groups? And what do we do with our tiredness?

Our previous research had taught us that in "the problem of tiredness" there was a "problematic" – a term and approach discussed by Smith (Smith 2006) - to be formulated and investigated. Although we did not use the term problematic, our intention was similar. To me a problematic is when the actualities of a problem are hooked up as social relations, linking everyday activities and ruling relations. And to study this was exactly what we had intended to do in our research project.

But we had not been directly informed by institutional ethnography, which, I would argue, affected the knowledge gained in a both negative and positive sense. Smith writes:

> "The aim of the sociology we call institutional ethnography is to *reorganize the social relations of knowledge of the social* so that people can take that knowledge up as an extension of our ordinary knowledge of the local actualities of our lives. It is a method of inquiry into the social that proposes to enlarge the scope of what becomes visible in that site, mapping the relations that connect one local site to others. Like a map, it aims to be through and through indexical to the local sites of people's experience, making visible how we are connected into the extended social relations of ruling and economy and their intersections. And though some of the work of inquiry must be technical, as mapmaking is, its product should be ordinarily accessible and usable, just as a well-made map is, to those on the terrain it maps." (Smith 2006, p 29).

I wish we had stated our aims so clearly! It would have helped us to stick to the approach instead of halfway falling back on mainstream sociology. We did produce knowledge that "enlarged the scope of what becomes visible in that site" and knowledge was "accessible and usable" to our subjects, something they confirmed when the results were presented to them. But we did not do "all the linking" and replaced the lacking links with theoretical statements about the links. That is, instead of making visible what the linking of social relations looks like in praxis, we stated them as theoretical facts relying on others' research.

So how, when and where did we go wrong?

To illuminate how tiredness was done and understood in different classes and gender, we took professions and jobs as our point of departure. Both quantitative as well as qualitative studies were conducted. The qualitative studies, which I would like to dwell upon here, include studies of four occupations and professions – engineers, teachers, waiters, domestic nursing personnel – and their respective workplaces in

Oslo: a firm, two schools, a restaurant, and a bureau for community service. We interviewed 10-20 employees of each category and men and women in proportion to the gender ratio of respective occupation and profession.[4]

Focusing on these professions and jobs meant that they were treated as institutions, or rather, that they could have been investigated as institutions. Treating a profession as an institution would mean investigating how the work performed is informed by the texts of the profession (educational curricula, journals, job description, professional rules and regulations and so forth) as well as the context of the specific workplace. Treating a profession as an institution opens for the possibility of connecting the local with the extra local, the everyday job activities with the ruling relations. This was a possibility we unfortunately did not grasp.

In the interviews we tried to track our interviewees through their different work situations and asked them to explain their different work tasks in detail, throughout the working day. Implicit and explicit references to texts informing their praxis were actually often made and these we focused on in the interview as well as in our analyses. We did however neither go to these texts nor systematically link them to each other. Consequently, important conditions were left un-investigated and invisible. And further, by focusing on the profession, the workplace was only indirectly investigated. It was how the workplace came into sight through the employees work descriptions that was made a theme.

By treating neither professions nor workplaces as institutions in the sense used by institutional ethnography, we also reproduced a reified understanding of class. When investigating the works of teachers we had chosen two different schools, one in a working class area and one in an upper middle class area. Here we would have had an excellent chance to see how class is done through the praxis of the institutions of profession and workplace. But since we did not go all the way with the institutional perspective we did not produce the material to make such analysis possible and therefore collapsed the two materials into one. How class was done, how the institution of the profession functioned in different class settings making its own as well as the class relations of others visible, was accordingly neither highlighted nor made an issue.

So were there no merits in not having an institutional approach? Yes, I believe there were, even though those "other" approaches and findings might be integrated into the approach of institutional ethnography. They are, I believe, however not automatically

[4] We also tried to get the different generations and family situations represented. Last but not the least important criteria when selecting respondents were if they (in the questionnaires done in our quantitative studies) had stated tiredness to be a problem or not. Finally, we also conducted a specific study of collective as well as individual "changers" (workplaces and employees who try out other ways of organizing time to improve the life and work situation). In all, approximately 100 qualitative interviews were conducted, including about 20 interviews with bosses and managers of different levels. All the material is presented and discussed in our book, "The Time of Tiredness" (in Norwegian, Oslo 2001) as well as in articles (for example Widerberg 2005, Widerberg 2006) and several reports (in Norwegian) published at the University of Oslo.

focused when doing institutional ethnography. The merit of our approach then might be that we can add something to the approach of institutional ethnography, and that something is the role of body, emotions and identity.

We did not – in line with the approach of institutional ethnography – start out with any theoretical definitions of tiredness that we were to validate empirically. How people themselves experience tiredness in their everyday life was our starting point. Extensive pilot projects[5] had taught us that the theme had to be approached descriptively to avoid "taken for granted" statements, and allow for variations to unfold. We tried to track our interviewees through their different work situations at home and at work, both during the weekday and the weekend. We also asked them to reflect upon the different types of tiredness they felt, where they perceived the tiredness to be located on their body, and how they handled these different types of tiredness.

We found that each profession and job prescribes or enacts a particular body, or rather a particular way of doing the body, which might be in line with or in conflict with other structuring prescriptions, such as gender, class, ethnicity and so forth. The gendered social organisation of a job or profession proved to be embodied both structurally (by the institution of the profession) and locally (by the workplace). And the body habits of a profession or job – locally unfolded – become issues of identity. It becomes the way you are or who you want to be. And once understood in terms of identity, job issues tend to become individualized.

By unfolding the social organization embedded in their body habits our interviewees were, however, given the tools to link or hook themselves up to each other. They could recognize the relations they shared but also the relations that differentiated them. How gender comes into play in the organisation and praxis of professions and jobs was hereby also made more visible. So even though we focused on the body, it was not the individuated body we sought to highlight but the body as incorporating as well as enacting social organization and relations.

Starting out with the everyday actualities of work implies starting out with the interviewees "work knowledge". Dorothy E. Smith stress two aspects to work knowledge (Smith 2006, p 151). One is the person's experience and the second is the implicit or explicit coordination of his or her work with the work of others. In both cases the role of texts should be highlighted. By asking for detailed descriptions about their tasks and relations, we managed to escape "the institutional capture" of their work knowledge. That is, they did not use official job descriptions or institutional discourses when describing their work to us. Stressing that we were not familiar with their jobs and work tasks, the interviewees were encouraged to specify the basics.

Had we however been familiar with the concept of institutional capture, we would have tried to highlight such captures, so as to illuminate their existence and role in praxis. The texts of the jobs (job descriptions, work-place descriptions and regula-

[5] The pilot projects include a month's diary on tiredness, and interviews and observations of family members and friends. All the material is presented and discussed in the book and reports mentioned above.

tions) – which we did not investigate – could have told us something about institutional captures, but not all. Institutional captures are also part of the more general discourses permeating work places. And such discourses were expressed in our material (and explored), not regarding work knowledge as such but when tiredness was made a theme.

In the book where the research results were presented, we had a chapter for each profession and workplace. Although we could have explored both the profession and workplace more fully and in line with institutional ethnography, we still presented a fair enough local map. In the summarizing chapters however, something definitively did go wrong.

We did what was expected of us as sociologists, also by ourselves. We were to use our material to "say something about work, gender and body in modernity" as we had stated as our aim. Of course this ambition is not wrong in itself but how it is enacted is another issue. We did it the mainstream way and said for example;

> "Across profession, class, gender and generation an increase in intensity at work, as well as in life more generally, can be observed in our studies as well as in other studies of the situation in the developed countries (Robinson, J. and Godbey, G. 1997; Levine 1996; Lilleaas, U-B. and Widerberg, K. 2001). People want to get something out of their time and their lives. It is all about getting a lot done, and to be done with it so that one can move on to something else. This intensity seem to be both structurally and ideologically determined.
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> *Structurally,* the constant reorganisation at the workplace (now an unquestioned norm of a modern organisation) implies that we are in change all the time. The goal of efficiency means, without exception, an increase of intensity at work (Coser, L. 1974; Carnoy, M. 2002). In short, more is to be done in less time. This structural force, based on a globalised capitalist economy, strikes most professions. The similarities between the occupations in our study are therefore quite obvious (Lilleaas, U-B. and Widerberg, K. 2001). Engineers, teachers, waiters, and domestic nursing personnel are all affected by reorganisation and an increase of work intensity. It has become normal to "have too much to do". They report that is just the way it is nowadays, everywhere.
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> *Ideologically*, this development is understood and expressed in terms of "freedom, flexibility, and development", both by employers and employees (Carnoy, M. 2002). The engineer, teacher, waiter, and domestic nurse assistant all express that one of the things that they value most in their work is the freedom (Lilleaas, U-B. and Widerberg, K. 2001). By this they mean different things, but the discourse is the same. For all of them, the work amount has increased and they have to work faster and/or longer hours. The increase of tempo makes "freedom and flexibility" even more important, maybe even structurally necessary. It is often not possible to work like this eight hours in a row, five days a week. Part-time (domestic nurse assistants), concentrated work-periods (waiters), or a divided workday (teachers and engineers) are made a necessity if one is to cope at all." (Widerberg 2006)

Subsuming our research results like this, implies that we were caught by the institutional capture of sociology. Theoretical concepts are here used instead of explicating the links that could substantiate, specify, validate or disqualify the understandings that the concepts express. What we could and should have done was instead to explore these structural and ideological forces from the bottom up. How often had the workplaces in question been through reorganization? Which were the texts of reorganization and how were these related to other texts of reorganization? And the ideology of freedom, flexibility and self fulfilment, was that institutionally captured and if so how? How were the structural and ideological forces enacted and linked locally and translocally?

By not mapping properly, our research was not only "made political" and an easy target for those with more substantiated knowledge, it also closed rather than opened up further insights and investigations. Structural and ideological forces are something to be explored, linking the local to the extra local so as to produce substantiated and specified knowledge. This we did not do. And I believe that we had not gone so wrong in the end if we had not gone slightly wrong all the way. That is, if we had had Dorothy E. Smith's institutional ethnography more as a guiding star in our studies of the professions and workplaces, we would have been used to a way of analysing that would have come to our help, also when trying to summarize.

This brings me to some final reflections. As I have tried to illustrate above, it is quite obvious that our approach was *inspired* by Dorothy E. Smith's method of inquiry, but also that we did not *use* her design of institutional ethnography. We were neither ethnographic nor institutional enough. If we had been our research would have been improved, I believe, on all levels. But then it would probably also have been another kind of research, focusing on one profession, workplace or area. And since there might be themes which are not easily formulated as a problematic within the scope of institutional ethnography and yet worthy of investigation, the approach can first and foremost be used, I would argue, as a frame of reference.

What I am trying to say is that the institutional aspect of ethnography is a goal more or less relevant at different stages in a research project. It should be a tool to help us direct our research but not function as a limitation when formulating the problematic. To me our project has illustrated the importance of focusing on the embodiment of social organization, as body habits and as identity, if we are to understand both why and how we do, in our case, tiredness in everyday lives. And since institutional ethnography not automatically incorporate such a focus, it needs to be formulated as *part* of any problematic under study.

Embarking on institutional ethnography is a demanding project, both theoretically and empirically. Empirically, because there are so many links to hook up, which necessitates a quite limited scope. And yet it will still be more work demanding than what we have been used to when using other approaches. Theoretically, it is hard to grasp because it is a way of doing sociology that is fundamentally different to the one we have been taught as sociologists, even though its foundation rests on approaches familiar to us all.

It is the linking of the local to the extra-local and the way of doing this, that is new and different. Few, if any sociologists in Scandinavia make use of this perspective. Being and feeling alone with this passion of mine, has of course neither furthered nor challenged my use of it. And this is probably the reason why I in my own research have not taken the chance to fully embark on it. And yet I believe that it is probably mainly through empirical research that I can reach and persuade my fellow colleagues of its merits.

To me this exercise has been enlightening. And I hope that some readers have been inspired to approach, make use of and develop institutional ethnography. The context of the Scandinavian welfare states and societies should make a most interesting case to illuminate, and be illuminated by, institutional ethnography.

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